

## Chapter 6:

### Aspirations and Realities

By the twentieth century, economic and social patterns common to the peripheral communities of the West had come to define the trans-Pecos and southeastern New Mexico. American rules and laws held sway. Ranching, agriculture, and mining dominated regional economic life, and Anglo-Americans enjoyed a measure of control over the area's prior inhabitants, and even physical nature itself. Permanent settlements dotted the landscape — towns, farms, and ranches — defining the region dramatically different from that of pre-Columbian peoples, Victorio's followers, or even the rustlers and regulators of the 1870s.

This new level of energy was more apparent than real. Southeastern New Mexico and trans-Pecos Texas remained different from core areas of the nation — the humid and sticky agricultural lands of the Middle West, the expansive cattle ranches of the Great Plains, and the ports and factories of industrial America. Far removed from the politics, cultural life, and aspirations of either Texas or New Mexico, development in the region proceeded at a pace determined by local people and the economic demands of railroads and markets. Regional growth proved idiosyncratic, following rhythms dictated by physical limitations. Attempts to build dams and irrigate land had both succeeded and failed, bringing prosperity to some by linking them to national markets, but driving others to ruin when their decisions and the limited productivity of local land did not mesh. Only those who practiced subsistence agriculture succeeded at all, but they typically bumped along at the bottom of the economic ladder without the amenities craved by those closer to the market economy.

The end of private financing for large-scale projects tempered the tone of life in southeast New Mexico, but the industrial myth remained strong, and private enterprise still seemed the best way to shape a strong regional economy and culture. The era of dam-building exuded a bold optimism, a confidence in the ability to tame nature and bend it to the will of humans. With leaders such as James J. Hagerman spouting a philosophy of ongoing prosperity and everyone dreaming of wealth in the liquid gold regulated by the dam, not being drawn in was hard. Outside investment seemed to confirm local optimism, but when the money dried up and the projects withered, a more typical feel settled over the trans-Pecos. Instead of a perpetually bright future, local residents faced an ongoing struggle in which their success depended on the ability to persevere and to find new ways to eke a living from the parched ground they called home. While the region possessed significant attributes, shortages of capital and hopes severely impaired the development of promising economic strategies. A gap existed in the trans-Pecos, one that typified semiarid peripheries: they simply lacked the ability to sustain its peoples' aspirations.

For the first two decades after 1900, the area languished in a kind of torpor. Although the Texas legislature passed homestead provisions that increased settlement in what later became Guadalupe Mountains National Park, most new claims more closely resembled subsistence farms than the large-scale agricultural enterprises increasingly common elsewhere in the West. Around Carlsbad, people searched for new options, grasping at solutions such as guano mining to augment the irrigated agriculture upon which they had previously depended. While this created pockets of prosperity and some enthusiasm, it could not replace the ebullient optimism of the preceding decade.

At the southern end of the region, near the Guadalupe Mountains, the developments of the Hagerman era had a far more limited impact. Settled by immigrants streaming west from *llano* Texas, not from the north or mountain West that produced Hagerman, Eddy, and the other leading entrepreneurs of the 1890s and early 1900s, the region remained largely wide open, dotted by ranches separated by the immense distances that made Texas legendary. Few sources of water made each drop precious, holding population size in check and forcing many into a way of life that seemed archaic even to people of the small-town West. Ranch life remained hard, especially on the peripheries, and much of the region acquired a hard-edged cast. Its people struggled long and hard to survive. They knew and sometimes even resented their lot.

Despite the hardships, settlement around the Guadalupe Mountains increased after 1900, when the Texas legislature passed the Eight Section Act, which gave settlers larger portions of land. This typical western strategy owed its origin to explorer and Gilded Age Renaissance man John Wesley Powell. In 1878, while serving as head of the Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountains, he suggested to the Interior Department that 2,560 acres was a much more equitable size for homesteads in the arid West than 160 acres. Legislation such as the Timber and Stone Act of 1873, which allowed settlers to homestead additional lands for sources of wood and stone, set the precedent, and after 1900 significant federal legislation permitted similar claims on the public domain.<sup>1</sup> Although it served to attract more settlers, even the promise of more land could not assure prosperity.

By 1900, a slow but steady stream of settlers had trickled into the Guadalupe Mountains and the surrounding area. The Texas and Pacific Railroad owned thousands of sections of land in Hudspeth and Culberson counties, many of which were available to homesteaders after the first train arrived in Van Horn, Texas, in 1882. Possessed of the belief that land would grant them independence, settlers came slowly at first, then in droves. In 1883, R. P. Bean, who came to Van Horn from Lampasas, Texas, in an ox cart, homesteaded the "2" ranch, north of the town. The next year, John Formwalt purchased the Moon Ranch near Van Horn, while Perry Altman homesteaded the PX Ranch on the west side of the Guadalupe Mountains. Transactions conveying these and other ranches to new owners suggested how hard life was on a ranch in the trans-Pecos. Turnover was high, and many busted. Only the most determined souls and those with the fewest choices stayed and managed. Both groups

---

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley Powell. *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, quoted in Walter Prescott Webb. *The Great Plains* (NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931): 353, 419-422; Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (NY: Penguin Books, 1953); F. Louise Pfeffer: *The Closing of the Public Domain* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1950), 3-12.

exhibited traits that made the trans-Pecos their best — and sometimes last — hope. Peripheral people in a remote place, they remained largely apart from the institutions of their society.<sup>2</sup>

After the turn of the century, some institutions of industrial America reached this periphery, contributing to the illusion of modern development and causing some locals to muse that the pioneer period had ended with the new century. A rush of new filings accompanied other changes in the region, including the arrival of the first African-American resident in the Anglo-American era. George Johnson came to the Guadalupe Mountains after Perry Altman found him abandoned in New Orleans. Johnson broke horses for Altman until the rancher died after which he worked on a ranch belonging to John Helms. His son, George Johnson Jr., worked on a road crew during the 1930s. Other signs of change followed. In 1901, Jim Brownfield installed the first fence on the flats; after its completion, one could no longer drive the entire width of Texas without opening a gate. Brownfield became an important way new technologies reached the region. In 1904, he installed the first telephone line in Crow Flats, stringing it along the top of fence posts. Eventually a number of telephones were connected, each family with a different ring. When one phone rang, they all did, so no one expected privacy on this first party line. Two years later, Brownfield introduced the automobile to the area. Governmental institutions, a sure sign of the civilization that Mark Twain's fictional Huck Finn sought to avoid, soon followed. Post offices opened with regularity in small towns, with branches established both in Orange, New Mexico, and Ables, Texas, in 1903. The pattern continued throughout the first decade of the century. Schools opened, usually with homesteader wives as teachers, mail came by buckboard instead of on horseback, and other changes that offered a future consistent with the new century became common.<sup>3</sup> The trans-Pecos seemed to be acquiring the traits of the Carlsbad area, with more settlers and growth on the horizon.

One such settler, John Thomas "J. T." Smith, arrived in 1906, filed on a tract of land, and took up residence with his family at the old Rader brothers dugout by Frijole Springs while they built on to the nearby house begun by the Rader brothers. Earlier, while in Van Horn to work on the construction of the Jackson Hotel, Smith had discovered that the land around the spring, then called the Spring Hill Ranch, lacked an owner. As with other abandoned property, Smith could acquire homestead rights by depositing a filing fee at the El Paso courthouse. Early efforts of the Smith family appear to have been directed at subsistence and at first they seem to have lived only intermittently at the site. Within a few years, they lived full time at the Frijole Ranch and their presence served as a catalyst for the institutions that promised permanence. On August 30, 1916, a post office opened at the ranch, and by 1927 it received mail three days each week.<sup>4</sup> An outpost had been established, succeeding because of the determination of its residents.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ben Gilmore, "Guadalupe Mountains National Park History," unpublished typescript, Vertical File, Guadalupe Mountains National Park, 4-7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Gilmore, "History of Guadalupe Mountains National Park," 8-11; Rosa Lee Wylie, *History of Van Horn and Culberson County, Texas* (Hereford, TX: Pioneer Book Publishers, n.d.), 20; Froeschauer, *Cultural Landscape Report for the Frijole Ranch*, 8-25.

Another ranch, to which James Adolphus "Dolph" Williams came in 1917, illustrated how difficult such a life was in wilds of west Texas. Even the accounts of the construction of the house leave murkiness. In one story, Henry Belcher had the house constructed in 1908 for his new bride, Rena. According to another, Belcher's brother had the house built for his new bride, who stayed one day and one night and then fled the isolation and loneliness. Either way, the house was attractive. It was built with a steep gabled roof in the fashionable architectural style of the time, and nestled about 5,000 feet below Guadalupe Peak in the foothills, the house stood out. Henry and Rena Belcher and their baby daughter Bernice raised cattle on the ranch, carrying as much as 3,000 head. With water piped in from Bone Spring in the canyons below, the operation worked successfully for almost a decade. Facing the consequences of overgrazing, the ranch started to unravel. In the late 1910s, a drought further depleted the grass cover, and Belcher sold. Williams, a cowpuncher from Louisiana, bought the property. He remained a bachelor, initially running cattle with a partner named Geronimo Segura, who married and by the 1930s, had a wife and eight children who lived at place now known as Segura Dugout. After a few years, the two men switched to sheep and goats, which were better adapted to the varied environment of the Guadalupe. At times, the men ran as many as 3,000 animals; at others, as few as 500. In all situations, relatives and hired hands helped manage the flocks.<sup>5</sup>

The Williams ranch was isolated, and its residents worked to maintain steady contact with neighbors. Ranch life was interdependent, as people needed their neighbors and relatives. The social dimensions of such interaction were as important as the economic benefits derived from cooperation, and its made travel between ranches a constant reality. Williams was known as a frequent visitor at area ranches, especially Frijole ranch, a long and difficult trip from his ranch. Williams' nephew, Terry Scaife, remembered that the trip from the ranch to Frijole took them through Bone Canyon and up the slopes just beneath the main cliff. There they rode along, leading the horses across about fifty yards of slate until they reached the base of El Capitan. From there, they descended toward Guadalupe Spring. Williams was known for finding his way back to his ranch in the twilight by a trail only he knew.<sup>6</sup> Williams remained on the ranch until 1941, when he moved to Black River Village, New Mexico. He died there the following year.

To the north near the town of Carlsbad, the next in a series of replacement economies, new strategies conceived to return the area to its previous economic status, began to emerge early in the new century. At first the community sought new economic forms to augment irrigated agriculture and ranching, but after the demise of large-scale private irrigation, it sought to supplant these amenities completely. The most important new enterprise was the mining of guano, a commonly used fertilizer before the development of synthetic and chemical substitutes. Bird and bat colonies provided the best sources of guano, and intrepid explorers in many parts of the Southwest sought these droppings as a source of economic sustenance, and even wealth. Central Texas, with its own system of limestone

---

<sup>5</sup> n. a., "Williams Ranch, First Draft, 1977," Guadalupe Mountains National Park Vertical File.

<sup>6</sup> n. a., "Williams Ranch, First Draft, 1977," Guadalupe Mountains National Park Vertical File; John F. Chapman, "Visit of Nephew to Dolph Williams (Williams Ranch), August 31, 1972," Guadalupe Mountains H2215, Guadalupe Mountains National Park Library.

caves, yielded some guano. So did areas under the limestone hills of eastern Kansas, distilled from the Permian Sea, and other similarly porous locations. The locations of guano deposits typically shared a revealing characteristic; the surrounding land and population were poor. These smaller deposits encouraged intraregional guano usage, with locally procured supplies spread on local land, a hedge against the decline in quality of marginal tracts. Larger deposits had great value in the market.

During the nineteenth century, guano mining had become an international industry of sufficient importance that its control became a target of U.S. diplomacy. From the 1840s into the 1890s, a worldwide rush for guano took place. Supplies from Peru's arid Chita region set the standard, and American entrepreneurs hurried to compete. Between 1856 and 1903, U.S. businessmen claimed ninety-three separate islands, atolls, keys, and any other outcropping of rock that held guano under the authority of the Guano Islands Act of 1856. The American government stood ready to support such acquisitions with the threat of military intervention. Lands claimed by these entrepreneurs became U.S. territories, allowing the rapid development of their resources under appalling conditions. Companies kidnapped and took workers to these islands to labor in the muck of the mountains of wet guano that covered these islands. Often overcome by the ammonia in the guano, some workers suffered lung disease and other maladies from breathing spore-filled air, and their living conditions paralleled those on prison islands. Until mixed fertilizers emerged as a cost-effective replacement after the turn of the century, guano acquisition remained a focus of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>7</sup>

When guano mining developed near the town of Carlsbad around 1900, it was already an anachronistic and obsolete strategy typical of small communities on the peripheries of industrial America. By 1899, more than 400 American fertilizer plants utilized a range of materials that doomed guano mining. Standard Oil and the Armour Company produced fertilizer from their byproducts, swamping the market and pushing guano aside. This once valuable material only remained viable in discrete niches that were too small to interest large corporations. Beginning in the 1880s, some Carlsbad-area farmers collected guano for their own use, but the sources they discovered were not large enough for systematic development. In 1903, Abijah Long, a recent arrival from Goldthwaite, Texas, who had tried a number of occupations, was working as a freighter for the Joyce Pruitt Company of Carlsbad. At the end of each day, Long turned his mules loose to graze near Oak Creek Springs. Then, with two companions, Sam Evans and "Mr. Brown," he explored the area near his camp. "Anyone who went out of town kept their eyes open," Long later wrote, "in search of something that might be valuable." On a typical foray, he found a hole in the ground, one that seemed to lead to a much larger area. Long lowered a lantern into the hole, but still could not see anything. Curious he descended, coaxing Evans to come with him and the two soon found themselves standing on the floor of an enormous room, lit only by their lantern.<sup>8</sup>

Long and Evans had entered one of the countless limestone caves that lay underneath the

---

<sup>7</sup> Jimmy M. Skaggs, *The Great Guano Rush: Entrepreneurs and American Overseas Expansion* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 129-49, 199.

<sup>8</sup> Abijah Long and Joe N. Long, *The Big Cave* (Long Beach, Calif.: Cushman Publications), 8-21; Robert Nymeyer and William R. Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years: A Photographic History of the Cave and Its People* (Carlsbad, N.Mex.: Carlsbad Caverns-Guadalupe Mountains Association, 1991), 14-15; Skaggs, *The Great Guano Rush*, 199.

Permian Uplift. Formed by the contact between oxygen and the upward seeping of hydrogen sulfide-rich brine from the oil and gas fields below, the caves lay. First carbonic acid and later hydrogen sulfide formed caves as the water table in the area dropped, leaving older caves closer to the surface and newer caves beneath, closer to the falling water table. Thousands of caves dotted the rim of the prehistoric sea throughout the Permian Uplift, and nineteenth-century adventurers who explored them recognized that such caves offered a special window into the past as well as the opportunity to seek the unknown.<sup>9</sup>

Exploring further, Long found the entrance to a second and more interesting cave, but the day was growing short. After inspecting the first cave, he succeeded in climbing out, but Evans remained stranded underground overnight. The following morning, as Long awaited Brown's return from Carlsbad with enough rope to make a ladder for Evans, he looked around for other interesting features. At dawn, he noticed a swarm of bats descending into the larger mouth of another cave. Awestruck by their vast numbers and the rapid end to the swarm as the sun beckoned, Long approached the side of the hill. "There, certainly, was an opening to something even larger inside," he reasoned. After Brown returned, and helped to extract Evans, Long tried to convince the men to join him in exploring the second cave, but they refused. The three returned to Carlsbad.<sup>10</sup> A few days later, Long, Andy Fairchild, and Jacob "Jake" Lynn returned to the site. Long descended first, and the other two soon followed, apparently forgetting that leaving one above outside the cave immensely increased their chances for a safe exit.

A peculiar odor assaulted their senses as they descended. The men stood, transfixed, afraid of whatever animal they assumed emitted the pungent aroma. Fear of cave-dwelling creatures, so common in American folklore, dominated their thoughts. The dim light of their torch offered a glimpse of the immensity of the cavern, and as they scoured the area for animal tracks, an occasional bat careened overhead. Moving forward, the smell became stronger, nearly overwhelming the men. Mounds of some substance, different from the rest of the cavern floor, rose in front of them, and Long intuited the source of the smell. "Bats," he exclaimed. "Millions of them." The mounds were guano, centuries of it piled up at their feet, one-quarter of a mile long and more than seventy-five feet wide. Long resolved to mine this tremendous resource. He took a few sackfuls to test the potency of the fertilizer and headed to Carlsbad to file a mining claim.<sup>11</sup>

A new industry that would help carry the region to the next economic panacea was under way within a few weeks. Long assembled a crew under the direction of his brother-in-law, Charles Hannsz, and soon roads and structures took shape. Workers cleared the area and sank a shaft above the guano deposits. A pulley lowered a bucket to the bottom, where men with shovels filled it and returned it to the top. Other improvements became necessary, and the expense of upgrading soon exceeded Long's

---

<sup>9</sup> Jagnow and Jagnow, *Stories from Stones*, 34-36.

<sup>10</sup> Long and Long, *The Big Cave*, 8-21; "Original of Discoverers of Cave Tells How He Entered It," Daily Current Argus, November 17, 1930; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 15-17.

<sup>11</sup> Long and Long, *The Big Cave*, 23-27; "Original of Discoverers of Cave Tells How He Entered It," Daily Current Argus, November 17, 1930; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 17-19.

resources. He took on partners, the Ramsey Brady Company of Carlsbad, to assure adequate financial resources.<sup>12</sup> The strange cave from which the bats departed every night at sunset had become an industrial site in the remote stretches of the Chihuahuan Desert tucked in the southeasternmost corner of the New Mexico Territory.

With access to capital, Long improved the process of extracting guano. The bucket and pulley method proved slow and laborious, and it took a long time to remove sufficient guano to make the twenty-eight mile trip to Carlsbad worthwhile. A route to the cave was leveled to make transportation easier, and Long's workers blasted two vertical shafts into the cave near the guano deposits. Long had hand cars with wooden wheels built to run on a wooden track made. Miners loaded the car with eight to ten fifty-pound sacks of guano at a time. After the sacks were sewn shut by John Forehand, another of Long's associates, workers hoisted the cart to the surface.<sup>13</sup>

With the development of this improved process, Long's mine became sufficiently productive to spur exploration for additional sources of guano. With strong demand for the fertilizer in southern California orange groves as well as other areas of the world, an economic mainstay for southeastern New Mexico developed. For the people of the region, the discovery of guano seemed like a godsend. Trapped between a failed past and an uncertain future, they now possessed the foundation for a new regional economy. Even Long noted the prior desperation of the region. Working with guano was disagreeable; bat excrement was malodorous and being underground was hardly desirable. The men stayed in the cave and continued working, Long presumed, because they had few other avenues of employment. After other miners found additional sources of guano, Carlsbad became a processing center, with drying racks to reduce the weight of the guano to lessen freight charges, an innovation made after the Hawaiian Fertilizer Company of San Francisco, Long's most significant client, announced it would only purchase dry fertilizer. Guano from the caves under the Permian Uplift soon became a staple of the regional economy.<sup>14</sup>

Workers extracted a fantastic amount of guano during the heyday of the industry, between 1903 and 1923. At peak operation, between twenty and forty men sacked, elevated, and hauled the bagged guano twenty-two miles to the railroad at Carlsbad. Beneath the surface, up to their hips in guano, two men with shovels could fill and tie four hundred fifty-pound sacks a day. From September to March, the principal guano mining season, Long's workers shipped about forty tons of guano each day, enough to fill between one and three railroad cars. According to guano miner/explorer Jim White, over this twenty-year period, a cumulative total of more than 100,000 tons of guano found its way to Carlsbad. Other estimates were far smaller, but a significant amount of guano was extracted from the caves.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Long and Long, *The Big Cave*, 33-36; "Original of Discoverers of Cave Tells How He Entered It," *Daily Current Argus*, November 17, 1930.

<sup>13</sup> Long and Long, *The Big Cave*, 37; Bob Hoff, "Bat Guano Mining at Carlsbad Caverns: Insignificant Historical Footnote or Important Period of History?"

<sup>14</sup> Skaggs, *The Great Guano Rush*, 215-26; Long and Long, *The Big Cave*, 37, 53-54; -----, *Carlsbad Current* July 2, 1907; Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (NY: Viking, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> Vernon Bailey, *Animal Life of the Carlsbad Cavern* (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins Co., 1928), 113-14; "Forty Cars of Guano," *Carlsbad Argus*, January 19, 1912; J. Tom Meador, "Guano, Guano Miners, and Guano

Like many similar enterprises, control over guano mining quickly passed from individuals to corporations and from locals to outside owners. Forced to leave the industry by the combination of what he thought low-grade guano, the demands of the work, and his own lack of resources to make his business grow, in 1906 Long sold out to H. F. Patterson of Carlsbad for \$500. Patterson retained him as foreman. Long's departure signaled the beginning of a new era for guano mining in the Carlsbad area as ownership shifted away from individuals to larger-scale operations. The El Paso Fertilizer Company purchased the property later in 1906, and in 1911, the General Fertilizer Association of Los Angeles paid \$75,000 for the cave. In the end, six companies, most of which marketed their product to southern California citrus growers, dominated regional guano mining.

Extraction continued throughout this era, seemingly unable to exhaust the enormous mountain of guano in the cave, especially with the limited technologies of the era. Predictions of an additional twenty years of mining in the caves continued into the 1910s. Soon after, competition from other sources of guano made mining less lucrative, and it became harder for regional companies to survive. By the 1920s, the General Fertilizer Company, long the mainstay of the Carlsbad area, approached insolvency.<sup>16</sup> Guano filled a niche that progressively diminished after 1920 and chemical compounds synthesized during World War II eventually replaced guano as an important source of fertilizer for American agriculture.

Among the miners in Carlsbad was a Texas cowboy named James Larkin "Jim" White. White was born on a ranch in Mason County, Texas, in 1882, and like many other Texans, came to the part of New Mexico still known as "Little Texas." He claimed to have begun "riding ranch" by the age of ten, and in 1892, he "teamed up" with John and Dan Lucas, owners of the X-X-X Ranch, about three miles from the mouth of the cave from which the bats emerged daily at sunset. White claimed that in June 1901 he "worked his way through the rocks and brush until I found myself gazing into the biggest and blackest hole I had ever seen out of which the bats literally seemed to boil." White estimated the depth of the cave at two hundred feet, watched the remaining bats depart, and returned to his camp. He told none of the other cowboys of his discovery.<sup>17</sup>

---

Mines," unpublished manuscript, Carlsbad Caverns National Park Library, 1984, 6-9. White reported the 100,000-ton figure to General Land Office Mineral Examiner Robert Holley in 1924. White's total may be an exaggeration. In his 1924 field notes, geologist Willis T. Lee, who the National Geographic Expedition in 1924 that spent six months at the caverns, offered the sum of 823 tons shipped from the caverns to the General Fertilizer Company of San Bernadino, California, between 1916 and 1920.

<sup>16</sup> Long and Long, *The Big Cave*, 54-55; "Guano Cave Deal," New Mexico Sun, May 31, 1907; "Guano Company Starts Work," Carlsbad Argus, April 14, 1911; "Original of Discoverers of Cave Tells How He Entered It," Daily Current Argus, November 17, 1930; J. N. Weems, "Appraisal of Concession of Bat Guano Mining in Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico," Carlsbad Cavern National Park Library, Carlsbad Caverns National Park; Hoff, "Bat Guano Mining at Carlsbad Caverns"; Robert Holley to John T. Murphy, April 10, 1923, National Archives, Record Group 79, Carlsbad Caverns Series 6, Central Classified Files.

<sup>17</sup> Jim White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns* (Carlsbad, N.Mex.: Jim White and Charley Lee White, 1940), 1. Although this book was actually written by journalist Frank Ernest Nicholson and is more accurate as a reflection of White's sentiments than his actual words, there is little reason to dispute the sequence and pattern of the events it recounts.



White likely was not the first to discover the so-called “Bat Cave,” but he was the first to regard it as more than a curiosity. When he happened upon it in 1898, the area had been explored, and others commented on the bats. Most exploration in the area involved economic speculation, but apparently those who saw the bats earlier could not find the caves from which they sprang or simply did not appreciate the value of guano. Perhaps the muckiness of the material, the idea of making a living from animal excrement, dissuaded others. White clearly believed he found something new and hid his find from the other cowboys. Just as certainly, he took greater interest in the caves than any predecessor.

A few days later, White returned, again furtively, but far better equipped. He arrived at mid-afternoon with a kerosene lamp, several coils of rope, some wire, and a hand axe, and he proceeded to cut wood for a ladder. His companion this time was a young Mexican boy called “Muchacho,” (Kid or Boy) the only one of the cowboys with any interest in White’s cave. White lowered the completed ladder into the cave, climbed down, and found himself in complete darkness and silence. Lighting his lantern, he maneuvered down to the floor of an awesome space. “I could see ahead of me a darkness so black it seemed a solid,” he later wrote. “The light of my lantern was a sickly glow.” White forged onward into the network of caves, elated, terrified, awestruck, and somehow oppressed by the silence and the darkness. To calm himself, he spoke aloud; the echoes nearly drove him mad. “Perhaps you can appreciate my sense of satisfaction when I wormed my way back and could see a shaft of sunlight filtering down through the entrance,” White remembered. Later he felt relieved to be above ground, somehow bested by the cave.<sup>18</sup>

White anticipated the modern spelunker, someone attracted to the cave for compelling personal reasons. He returned with whomever would accompany him, making as thorough an exploration as the limits of lighting and his resources would permit. He approached it systematically, telling all about what he encountered. Many felt that he invented the cave or at least profoundly exaggerated its size and depth. White actively wanted to persuade everyone of the importance of the cave. He could see that humans had visited the cave before him. He reportedly found a skeleton there, which was passed around the town and later lost. He found another, and then later, as a guano miner, a third. Despite this tangible evidence of a human presence, the tendency on the topside was to regard White as a bit eccentric. People in Carlsbad thought he fabricated the entire story. Local incredulity failed to deter him from an ongoing series of trips to the cave. Whenever he had a break in ranch work, White recounted, “I’d wrap a couple of sandwiches and explore more and more of the cave.”<sup>19</sup> Few others in the region appeared interested in it for anything but mining.

Almost a dozen people claimed to have reached the bat cave first, a claim that if substantiated granted local bragging rights, and over time, at least some potential for financial reward. As the caves attracted greater attention, White and Long engaged in a generation-long debate about who discovered the chamber, with each seeking to establish his primacy. The list of “discoverers” also included Rolth Sublett, who claimed to have revealed the cave to Long around 1900; John Forehand, a former

---

<sup>18</sup> White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns*, 2-8; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns*, 9.

employee of Long who claimed that he had been in the cave in 1898; and Charles J. Hannsz, but on balance these after-the-fact claims of primacy proved irrelevant.<sup>20</sup>

The real power of any primacy claim came from the privilege of defining the caves for outsiders. Adept at a range of promotional strategies, White made the caves his own in a manner similar to the way that archaeologists of the era claimed ruins as their private preserves. Deliciously eccentric as the twentieth century progressed, a romantic relic of an earlier time, and a fabulous teller of tall tales who envisioned the caves as more than a source of guano, White created a place in the national consciousness for the great caverns, a template through which mid-century America could understand the mysterious depths of Carlsbad Caverns. In this sense, he became the living embodiment of the cave during its transformation from a hole in the ground to source of guano to “eighth wonder of the world.” White first offered guided tours to a small, local audience in about 1901 and he remained associated with the caves until he died in 1946.<sup>21</sup> A conventional businessman, Long came in a distant second, and the others were mere pretenders to the throne.

White’s vision of the meaning of the caves led to the Carlsbad Caverns that generations of visitors emblazoned on the rear bumper of their automobiles. His tales possessed the flair and drama upon which myths are built, and the constant stories he disseminated elevated his claims to primacy. From 1901 until 1920, White tried to promote the caves, but he found few takers. In an apocryphal tale that may have approximated the truth, White awoke one morning in 1920 determined to “start the task of showing the world the cave whether they wanted to see it or not.” He began building trails and guard rails, leveling paths through the rock. On angular ascents and descents, he pounded discarded automobile axles — usually from Fords, he boasted — into the cracks in the rocks and strung them with galvanized wire to create handholds.<sup>22</sup> White’s system of trails became the first concession to the traveling public, a constituency only barely aware of the existence of the caves in 1920.

Photography helped to distribute the message. Ray V. Davis moved with his family to Carlsbad in 1913 to farm as he had in Kansas. He did not like farming and soon opened a small photographic studio. Most towns of the era had such a business; weddings and ceremonies always required a photographer, and family and commercial portraits sustained a thriving business. Very small communities relied on itinerant photographers, who arrived at predictable intervals, and Davis’s photography studio — his “picture gallery” as it was referred to at the time — provided one more piece of evidence that Carlsbad was a significant town. Davis’s gallery eventually became the catalyst for promoting the caves. Although legend has it that he accompanied two young travelers to the cave for his first photo trip in September 1922, Davis’s own account suggests that he had explored the cave with Jim White and

---

<sup>20</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 13-14; Neal Bullington, “Who Discovered Carlsbad Caverns?” (Unpublished typescript, 1968), Carlsbad Caverns National Park; Long and Long, *The Big Cave*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Almost fifty years after White’s death in 1946, Carlsbad Caverns was designated a World Heritage Site.

<sup>22</sup> White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns*, 12-13; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 39-41.

came to take pictures at White's behest.<sup>23</sup>

Davis was not the first to photograph the caves, but he was the first to reveal their grandeur in pictures. Commercial photographers had taken pictures of the guano mining operation and guano miners as early as 1906 or 1907. A local youth, George Adams, took his own photos of the caves before 1910. Davis went deeper into the caves than his predecessors, taking his early significant pictures in the King's Palace, often repeatedly shooting scenes for desired effect, endlessly tinkering with perspective and point of view, and experimenting with a range of lighting strategies and techniques. His photos captured what earlier efforts did not — the depth and mystery of the caverns, the unusual underground forms, and a scale so large as to dwarf human endeavors.<sup>24</sup> Davis's photos made Carlsbad Caverns remarkable.

Much of southeastern New Mexico remained incredulous. Davis's photos transformed the familiar into the spectacular, something that many in Carlsbad, accustomed to thinking of the caves as a smelly guano source, had difficulty comprehending. Davis acquired a reputation for exaggeration, a label that sorely vexed him. With White's help, he organized a tour of the cave for a group of local dignitaries. Although forty signed up, only thirteen appeared at the designated time. The group bunked at White's ranch overnight, and the next day they were lowered two by two in the guano bucket into the cave. After an awe-inspiring daylong tour, the men were lifted to the surface, struck by the majesty of the cave and in awe of its vast silence.<sup>25</sup> In a single day Carlsbad Caverns had become more than a mere source of guano — the most important people in Carlsbad had authenticated it as a spectacular place.

The tour suggested important ideas to White, and to a lesser degree, Davis. The thirteen visitors insisted that White take pay for his labors; after all, they ate his food, bunked at his house, and availed themselves of his guide services. Demurring at first, he finally accepted one dollar from each. He subsequently decided that he would charge visitors an admission fee of two dollars. Publicity from the trip sent a steady stream of townspeople to the caverns; White depicted this process as word-of-mouth advertising. Davis also benefitted as his images of the cavern established a standard, both for promotion and for souvenirs.<sup>26</sup> Although neither man ever became wealthy from such efforts, they shared an infatuation that made life exciting and occasionally profitable.

The caverns soon became a regional attraction, with White guiding tours and Davis shooting seemingly endless photographs of dignitaries. Visitors first mainly came from Carlsbad and Eddy County, and as the word spread, from much of southeast New Mexico, the trans-Pecos, and west Texas. Carlsbad Caverns became like many regional attractions of the day. Before television and film, before people widely heard radio, a natural phenomenon might be the most extraordinary thing a rural

---

<sup>23</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 58-61.

<sup>24</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 60-62; White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico*, 10-11, offers that tale of the two travelers. Davis's account, of repeated trips and a pattern over time, does less to strain credulity.

<sup>25</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 61; White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico*, 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 60-62; White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico*, 14.

family saw in a lifetime. The operation was not sophisticated: White lacked title to the land, but retained connections with guano mining by serving as the sim-official caretaker of the area. Visitors descended in an old guano bucket. Everything about a trip to the caverns was idiosyncratic, typical of the way life was often held together with baling wire on the peripheries of the nation. Davis made countless trips into the caves to shoot pictures, using vast quantities of magnesium powder to create a flash big enough to illuminate the object of his lens. Accidents, while usually insignificant, frequently resulted; Davis once fell into a fifteen-foot pit in the Big Room as he photographed a group of Masons. White had to rescue countless visitors who nearly fell into holes or off ledges. On another occasion, Davis photographed a group so large it required almost three pounds of flash powder to illuminate everyone. The explosion reverberated along the walls, and Davis feared that he had brought the caverns down upon himself and his guests. The walls held, but it was a scary moment. Life in the cavern guide business was energizing. "We had no end of fun," White remembered.<sup>27</sup>

Davis displayed an intrepid promotional wizardry that helped draw much attention to the caves. Using his own money, he embarked on a major advertising campaign, distributing pictures of the caves at conventions and installing enlarged photos — as large as three feet by four feet — in hotel lobbies and chambers of commerce throughout the Southwest. He printed 100,000 windshield stickers that read: "We visited Carlsbad Caverns, Photographed by Ray V. Davis." People took them not only for themselves, but for friends who had not yet made the trip. This inaugurated the long-standing tradition of status by bumper sticker, and the subsequent two generations of the American middle class felt incomplete if they lacked a "We Visited Carlsbad Caverns" bumper sticker on their vehicle. Postcards also sold wildly; Davis's assistant, a young man named Robert Nymeyer, turned out as many as 2,000 postcards each night for months on end, and even this did not keep up with the demand.<sup>28</sup> By 1922, Carlsbad Caverns enjoyed a significant place on the map of southwestern regional attractions.

Davis' promotions came at an important moment for the region remained in perilous economic straits, weighted down by a torpor that had existed since the beginning of the century. By the early 1920s, southeastern New Mexico seemed past its peak, only held together by federal water projects. Irrigation of new land slowed, and agriculture and ranching were regional mainstays in an era when the value of agricultural production fell against the cost of goods manufactured in the industrial cities of the nation.<sup>29</sup> The population of Carlsbad and of the region as a whole stabilized, irrigation remained controversial, and the decade seemed to pass by the region. Through a series of inadvertent steps, Carlsbad Caverns and its tourist appeal became the solution to the problems of the area, a panacea that could change the general direction of the region. The caverns underwent a steady transformation from local and regional attraction to one with national significance.

---

<sup>27</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 62-63; White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico*, 17-18.

<sup>28</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 64-65; "Notes of Interview of February 3, 1968 with Ray V. Davis, by WRH, at Mr. Davis' home," Carlsbad Caverns National Park Library.

<sup>29</sup> Hufstetler and Johnson, *Watering the Land: The Turbulent History of the Carlsbad Irrigation District*. (Denver: National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Region, Division of National Preservation Programs, 1993): 126-27.

Photography initiated this process, but a constellation of factors maintained the momentum. Davis' pictures offered a new way to look at Carlsbad Caverns. During the 1920s, the influx of tourists from within the region traveled the growing network of roads to see the caves, augmenting the regional economy. Most had seen one of Davis's photographs or at least had heard about them; throughout New Mexico and west Texas, the caves became the talk of the day. Many had also known of the guano mining that helped sustain the region, but did not appear to connect the two as emanating from the same place. The enthusiasm Davis's pictures generated prompted people to visit the caves. They recognized that something special lay beneath the otherwise ordinary trans-Pecos. Visitors regarded the bat caves as a new discovery, not the site of two decades of guano mining. This perspective embodied a kind of hope that the trans-Pecos possessed unique attributes and really was special, worthy of the attention of the nation.

During the early 1920s, the National Park Service, a new and aggressive agency, looked to buoy its position among competing federal agencies. In the astute hands of Stephen T. Mather, the first director of the agency, and his able second-in-command, Horace M. Albright, the Park Service added park areas with surprising regularity throughout the late 1910s and 1920s. Some were full-fledged national parks, the crown jewels of the system, requiring congressional approval — the Park Service established Zion, Grand Canyon, Acadia, Great Smoky Mountains, and Shenandoah national parks during this era. Others were national monuments, established by presidential prerogative under the Antiquities Act of 1906 and created for tactical — as well as aesthetic, cultural, and scientific — reasons. Battling other federal agencies, especially the U.S. Forest Service, the Park Service honed a practiced eye and supple acquisition skills.<sup>30</sup> In time, Mather and Albright developed successful strategies for park growth and consolidation, and the caves near Carlsbad attracted the attention of this formidable duo.

The news about their interest seemed to come simultaneously from different quarters. Jim White found "men with government cards" among his guests and hoped the government might be more responsive to his development schemes than the private investors he had previously queried. A movie company inquired about shooting a film at the caves, and officials at the General Land Office in Santa Fe realized that they knew too little about the location. By some accounts, U.S. Senator Holm O. Bursum and U.S. Representative John Morrow, both of New Mexico, had begun to lobby for a national monument. Irrigation and water allocation problems kept a stream of government officials surveying the Pecos River. Ongoing attempts to dam and irrigate in both states, especially a Reclamation Service study of Red Bluff on the Texas end of the Pecos Basin, required formal division of the river water, but the task proved elusive. The water held in Pecos River reservoirs regularly seeped out, and no one could find a way to recover it. Reports of the caves permeated this exploratory process, and by

---

<sup>30</sup> John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), 330; Hal Rothman, *Preserving Different Pasts: The American National Monuments* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Hal Rothman, "'A Regular Ding-Dong Fight': Agency Culture and Evolution in the NPS-USFS Dispute, 1916-1937," *Western Historical Quarterly* (April 1989): 141-61.

1923, the Department of the Interior began the process of assessing this unusual resource.<sup>31</sup>

The caves had acquired a place in regional culture and the numerous interests competing to use them inspired a reaction from federal officials. In April 1923, the General Land Office (GLO) dispatched Mineral Examiner Robert A. Holley to the caves. He arrived a skeptic, according to Jim White, who recounted Holley's impressions in his ghost-written autobiography: "We didn't feel as though this cave was of much importance, but the Department thought I'd better run down and measure it up so's they'd know if it was big enough for them to consider." White remembered that it took Holley nine days to lay his measuring line between the entrance and the Jumping Off Place. "I suppose you want to start on the lower level next?" White asked. Holley demurred.<sup>32</sup> Hyperbole for certain, White's story became a folktale.

Holley's response was more sophisticated than reported. The examiner's records show eight hours of measuring before he reached the Jumping Off Place, not nine days. He was clearly experienced in solving the problems that often beset federal officials in the small-town West. Holley also showed understanding of the delicacy of his task. "There is no use trying to camouflage the motive behind this work as they are all onto the game," Holley wrote his GLO superior, John T. Murphy, in confidence from Carlsbad on April 10, 1923. The locals supported the idea of withdrawing the area from entry to provide some kind of protection for the caves. "They are all tickled to know the government is taking an interest," Holley continued, noting that this stance was unusual during the 1920s in the West.<sup>33</sup>

The unique caves near Carlsbad created a context in which government intervention appeared to be an advantage. The caves were a source of local and regional pride, and government withdrawal and designation, especially in the increasingly important national park or monument categories, provided precisely the kind of recognition that locals craved. Even in the 1920s, every town had its claim to fame and government acknowledgment of the merits of such a claim was an important — and in the view of the time, impartial — distinction that helped separate the genuinely valuable from the cornball. In an area where federal involvement in reclamation saved the region from enormous expense and significant danger, the federal presence was not the perceived liability it had already become elsewhere in the West.

Holley's correspondence from Carlsbad and his subsequent report to the commissioner of the General Land Office revealed a strong tactical understanding of the social and cultural terrain of southeastern New Mexico, as well as considerable support for the idea of a reserved area. He advocated putting Jim White on the federal payroll. Holley needed an assistant, and White was the best-positioned person in the region to help federal efforts. He had ties to the General Fertilizer Company and had pioneered in guiding visitors to the caves. Holley recognized that he could maintain local support and have the advantage of White's experience with a simple gesture that would only cost six dollars a day. Holley noted that the fertilizer company was in arrears not only to White, but also to

---

<sup>31</sup> Hufstetler and Johnson, *Watering the Land*, 126-27; White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico*, 12; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> White, *The Discovery and History of Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Robert A. Holley to John T. Murphy. April 10, 1923.

creditors, and he insisted that the government did not need to purchase the company's forty-acre holding. "Let them retain their Bat deposit and work it at their pleasure," he wrote Murphy. "The Gov't. can sink a shaft for a few hundred feet at a much lower point, easily accessible, and have a much better entrance." Holley envisioned a pattern of visitor traffic that bypassed the company's entrance for a new one fashioned by the government.<sup>34</sup> In the 1920s, this was a typical strategy that helped in defining the role of the federal government in many areas in the West.

Holley's extended trips into the cavern left him amazed and awed. They were so impressive that Holley's final report used a flowery descriptive language uncommon in government reports, then and now. "I am wholly conscious of the feebleness of my efforts," he summarized, "to convey in words the deep conflicting emotions, the feelings of fear and awe, and the desire or an inspired understanding of the Divine Creator's work." The caves moved him, spoke to his soul and his sense of the nation and its destiny in complex ways, and left him feeling that the country would be diminished without these caves designated as a national treasure. Holley recommended the reservation of the caves outside Carlsbad as a national monument, a solution Jim White wholly supported.<sup>35</sup>

The report created much enthusiasm within the region, and residents of Carlsbad sought to show off their newfound prize to anyone who passed. In one instance, W. F. McIlvain, the president of the local chamber of commerce, invited the participants in a water users meeting to see the caves. Among the three who ventured to the caves was Richard L. Burges, a prominent El Paso attorney. Burges was enthralled, but left with the idea that the United States Geological Survey (USGS) sponsored Holley's work. When he wrote Washington, D.C., to ask for a copy of the report, USGS officials noted that Holley did not work for them, but that one of their most trusted field officials, Willis T. Lee, was soon headed to Carlsbad on other business.<sup>36</sup>

Lee was typical of the first generation of post-Civil War scientists. Born in 1866 and raised on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania, he had a passion for science that he could not develop until he left home. After working his way through Wyoming Seminary in Pennsylvania and continuing to Wesleyan University, the University of Chicago, and finally Johns Hopkins University, Lee became exceptional among his early twentieth-century peers for the depth of his passion and commitment and the breadth of the education he so actively sought. In a time when many scientists were self-taught, he acquired a first-rate education. His credentials gave him greater status than many others, but Lee sacrificed much to pursue his passion from a place in the federal service.<sup>37</sup>

Lee's aptitude and understanding of geology far surpassed that of most scientists, and after he

---

<sup>34</sup> Holley to Murphy, April 10, 1923; John T. Murphy to the Commissioner, General Land Office, April 12, 1923, NA, RG 79, Carlsbad Caverns, Series 6.

<sup>35</sup> John Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), 330-31; R.F. Burges to Director, U.S. Geologic Survey, August 21, 1923; W. F. McIlvain to U.S. Geologic Survey, September 11 1923, National Archives, RG 79, Central Classified Files, Carlsbad Caverns.

<sup>36</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Curtis M. Hinsley Jr., *Savages and Scientists: The Smithsonian Institution and the Development of American Anthropology, 1846-1910* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981); Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 93.

joined the USGS, he became one of its best regional examiners. Stationed in Albuquerque beginning in 1903, he played an important role in the construction of the dam-based irrigation infrastructure of New Mexico. Lee uncovered the reasons behind the failure of the McMillan Dam in 1905 — the thick beds of gypsum and rock salt not only drained naturally, they dissolved. Even impermeable rocks shattered under the force of the water. As a result, the dam was ineffectual, its reservoir continuing to lose water. In his published account in the prestigious journal *Science*, Lee noted these flaws and recommended building the new reservoir elsewhere. Local political forces ignored the science and rebuilt the reservoir on the same location. Even an embankment built to keep water from the porous areas failed to prevent drainage.<sup>38</sup>

By the early 1920s, Lee was nearing sixty and remained at the peak of his career. He was widely respected and commanded the attention of a national audience at a time when scientists spoke in the romantic language that the public embraced. A member of both the Cosmos Club and the Explorers Club, bastions of intellect and access to power, Lee could always find a well-positioned audience for his ideas. When the government sent him to Carlsbad in 1923 to assess the leaking Spencer Dam and the nearby Carlsbad-Reservoir Site No. 3, which allowed him to repeat his familiar message about the unsuitability of the lower Pecos River for reservoirs, it was only a short step to look at the caves and see what merit they might have.<sup>39</sup>

Like White and Davis before him, Lee instantly felt the magic of the caves. They entranced and enchanted him, and he felt pulled toward them. In his subsequent report and in a series of talks that followed his trip, he joined the chorus advocating a national monument at Carlsbad Caves. With little local opposition — and in fact much encouragement from White, McIlvain, and nearly everyone else along the Pecos River — the conditions necessary for a national monument designation finally aligned. On October 25, 1923, President Calvin Coolidge used the power granted him by the Antiquities Act of 1906 and designated 719 acres under which the caves lay — excepting the forty-acre patent of the General Fertilizer Company — as Carlsbad Cave National Monument.<sup>40</sup>

National monument status was never significant nor widely sought after in the 1920s. The category had grown piecemeal and remained as much an odd storehouse of threatened places resulting from special interests as it was a collection of legitimate park areas. Since the first establishment of a national monument in 1906, all kinds of reserved areas had been added to the category with no consistency of purpose, some remarkably significant, others so inconsequential as to defy legitimate explanation. The Grand Canyon became a national monument in 1908; Mount Olympus National Monument, later Olympic National Park, was established the following year, as was Shoshone Cave

---

<sup>38</sup> Hufstetler and Johnson, *Watering the Land*, 97-108; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 93. As late as 1975, the reservoir still lost an inordinate amount of water as a result of seepage.

<sup>39</sup> Hufstetler and Johnson, *Watering the Land*, 126-28; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 67, 93; Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism and Transformation in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Ise, *Our National Park Policy: A Critical History* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1961), 330; Rothman, *Preserving Different Pasts*, 135; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 94-95.



National Monument in Wyoming, which so defied the designation “national” that it joined a very small number of decommissioned national park areas in 1954. The most important aspect of the monument category before 1930 was political: a significant number of sites used this designation as way stations to national park status. Zion National Park began as Mukuntuweap National Monument; Sieur de Monts National Monument later became Acadia National Park; the Grand Canyon advanced to national park status in 1919. The monument category lacked definition and, some caustically observed, integrity.<sup>41</sup>

Only in the Southwest did the monuments develop a distinct identity and only as the result of the efforts of one man. From his headquarters at Casa Grande National Monument outside Coolidge, Arizona, Frank “Boss” Pinkley carved a place for the monuments in regional culture. Accentuating archaeology, ostensibly the purpose behind the Antiquities Act of 1906, Pinkley made the category an important part of the regional cultural landscape, but his emphasis on prehistory made other kinds of park areas orphans in an already underfunded and uncomfortably managed system. While Pinkley always welcomed the addition of new areas, his primary emphasis remained archaeology.

Lee’s efforts, and not monument status, elevated Carlsbad Cave National Monument. Lee published the results of his initial visit in the January 1924 issue of *National Geographic*, and the National Geographic Society offered \$16,000 to bankroll an expedition to the caves that same year. One account suggests that Lee needed to conjure up a prehistoric skull to persuade the directors of the society, who shared in a widespread, class-based obsession with prehistory at the time, to back the expedition. With funds in hand and a paid leave of absence from the USGS, Lee’s family comprised most of the expedition, with Lee and his two children, twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth and nineteen-year-old Dana, doing most of the work. Vernon O. Bailey, the renowned naturalist, also accompanied the group, as did Russell R. Runyan of the USGS, who mapped the caves. The expedition spent almost six months exploring, surveying, mapping, and photographing Carlsbad Cave National Monument.<sup>42</sup>

The presence of a National Geographic Society team exploring the caverns was a heartening and significant event in southeastern New Mexico. Even in the 1920s, rural areas felt isolated and far away from the exciting innovations of modern life, and anything out of the ordinary attracted much attention. As people in Carlsbad began to take more pride in the geological curiosities nearby, and especially as White and Davis promoted the caves in a way that illustrated their economic benefits, attention from a national organization of prestige and stature seemed inherently good. Not only did it attract new people who thought the region important, it also offered the opportunity for locals to feel that their home area enjoyed a place of significance in American society, positive proof that they would not entirely waste the energies of their past.

Even more important was the portrayal of the caverns that graced the cover of *National Geographic* in September 1925. Although Lee tried to rename the features of the cavern with Native

---

<sup>41</sup> Rothman, *Preserving Different Pasts*, 134; Rothman, “From Monument to Park,” *Environmental Review* 10 n. 2 (Spring 1986): 46-57.

<sup>42</sup> Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 94; Dana W. Lee, “The National Geographic Society’s Expedition to Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico March 20 to September 15, 1924 - A Diary and Record of the Expedition,” typescript, Carlsbad Caverns National Park Library.

American names appropriate to the Southwest, a transformation that White mocked and locals resisted with vigor, his expedition helped make the caverns a focus of national science and culture, and even more important, a destination for visitors. In a time when national tourism remained a largely upper-middle-class activity, its tone still dictated by the cultural affirmation embodied in the expositions and world's fairs of the turn of the century, such attention proved the importance of the caves. With photographs in *National Geographic* and with the colloquial designation of the site as another of the so-called eighth wonders of the world, the caverns appealed to an audience far broader than the locals who typically viewed them only as an interesting curiosity.

This level of interest became the catalyst for the development of tourism in the region, an activity that local elites made their own. After Lee departed, W. F. McIlvain, the president of the local chamber of commerce, took on the role of custodian. In the 1920s, national monument custodians were typically volunteers, "dollar-a-year men" from nearby communities or neighbors of the reserved site. Most played a role in the establishment of the monument and had some deep abiding passion for the place they guarded. A few were like McIlvain, representatives of local elites with other careers. The latter group typically surfaced when the monument had some potential value in status or income for the region. The Park Service usually chose its volunteer representatives wisely, recognizing that influential locals who stood to gain were more likely to be responsible and to follow through on National Park Service directives. When NPS Acting Director Arno B. Cammerer offered McIlvain the custodial position, he pointedly noted that he expected "that a booking office be established in [Carlsbad's] City Hall and the present hit-and-miss arrangement would be done away with." In other situations, the monuments were left to eccentric buffs, but not in Carlsbad.<sup>43</sup>

The spate of publicity also helped promote the site and the public became increasingly interested. Tourism numbers grew: after 1,280 visitors came to Carlsbad Cave National Monument during 1923-1924, the first year following its establishment, the number rose consistently, reaching 76,822 in 1928-1929. The swelling numbers meant that even greater opportunities existed for those who wanted to capitalize on the cave. Other photographers followed, prominent among them Russell Neville, who settled in Carlsbad in 1929. Known as the Cave Man, Neville presented a confusing array of personas to the world. He had been an attorney, an accountant, a magician, an author, a photographer, and the person who shot the first extensive film of caves across the nation. Neville was also a popular speaker and his photography won prestigious awards. Although his first film efforts in Carlsbad were underwhelming, he quickly learned how to produce outstanding still photographs. Another of the early promoters of the caverns, Neville helped bring the park even greater popularity.<sup>44</sup>

National monuments typically fell well outside the development-funding patterns of the National

---

<sup>43</sup> Arno B. Cammerer to W. F. McIlvain, August 28, 1924; McIlvain to Cammerer, September 4, 1924, NA, RG 79, Series 7, Carlsbad Caverns; Rothman, "From Monument to Park," *Environmental Review* V 10 2 (Spring 1986): 46-57.

<sup>44</sup> Rothman, *Preserving Different Pasts*, 88-104; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 117-21.

Park Service. Throughout the 1920s, the agency managed monuments in a haphazard fashion. The only regional organization to support the category was Pinkley's in the Southwest, and his official correspondence from the era was laden with calls for better funding and organization. Only one condition elevated national monuments to the forefront of Park Service interest: plans to raise the monument to national park status. Typically, development activity at a national monument, especially one that offered values other than archaeology, was a precursor of an effort to create a national park.<sup>45</sup>

From its initial proclamation, Carlsbad Cave differed from most other sites in the monument category. As Lee departed, Cammerer began to assess development, administration, and funding strategies. The Park Service had to keep an eye on Jim White, whose cave-guiding rate had been set by contract at ten dollars per party for up to five visitors, with two dollars for each additional tourist. NPS officials pushed to have White and the Carlsbad-area transportation services invest in maintaining the roads and trails as they sought federal funding. NPS estimates of the cost of development approached \$80,000, well beyond the sum allocated to the entire monument category in 1925, and the agency approached friendly New Mexico politicians, especially U.S. Senator Andrieus A. Jones, to secure their support for a special appropriation.<sup>46</sup>

Many reasons existed for the New Mexico congressional delegation to support development of Carlsbad Cave National Monument. Despite the state's spectacular scenery, vast historical and archaeological treasures, and other interesting features, it still lacked a national park. For the new state, a little more than a decade old during the mid-1920s, such a prize was well worth the effort it required. Earlier attempts in New Mexico had failed, and internecine struggles had bogged down ongoing ideas elsewhere in the state. The government rejected Former Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall's proposal for an "All-Year Round National park" near his southern New Mexico ranch, and the Park Service grappled with the Forest Service over Bandelier National Monument and the Pajarito Plateau in the northern half of the state. Under these circumstances, Carlsbad Cave offered the Park Service and New Mexico important tactical advantages, as well as spectacular caves.<sup>47</sup>

The rapid development of Carlsbad Cave illustrated its significance. Close on the heels of the monument proclamation, the National Park Service implemented procedures and mechanisms characteristic of national parks instead of those typical for national monuments. Congress appropriated \$5,000 in 1924 and \$25,000 the following year for development of the monument, the latter sum significantly more than the combined total allocated to the rest of the national monument category. The Park Service appointed Jim White the monument's chief ranger at a salary of \$1,860 per year; excepting general superintendent Frank Pinkley, only custodians oversaw national monuments elsewhere, the vast majority of whom were volunteers. Road construction also proved critical. The first

---

<sup>45</sup> Rothman, "From Monument to Park," 46-57.

<sup>46</sup> Cammerer to McIlvain, August 24, 1928, Arno B. Cammerer to W. F. McIlvain, September 11, 1924, NA, RG 79, 7, Carlsbad Caverns.

<sup>47</sup> Dietmar Schneider-Hector, *White Sands: The History of a National Monument* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 59-71; Hal Rothman, *On Rims and Ridges: The Los Alamos Area Since 1880* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

road that brought visitors to the caves was the same one used to haul guano to the railhead; in October 1925, McIlvain confidently looked forward to the imminent completion not only of a new approach road to the cave entrance, but a new state road to the monument boundary.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, the Park Service planned to use Carlsbad Cave in a manner different from the rest of the monuments.

Visitor service amenities increasingly reflected the influence of the Park Service. The first visitors were lowered into the cave in the same bucket used to hoist out guano. Locals such as McIlvain and White controlled the nature of visitation, and NPS officials from afar could only make periodic suggestions. In 1925, as the money for developing the monument became available, the Park Service pressured White and McIlvain to reduce the fee for the lower cave trip from three dollars to two. Interest in the monument was growing, and it was reflected in more group travel. One example was the New Mexico Masonic Grand Lodge conventioners, who met in Roswell in February of 1926 and traveled to the caverns on a special Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railcar. Park Service officials recognized that the need to exert greater control over visitor services. By 1926, as the Park Service prepared to assume formal administrative duties, agency officials even began to standardize the apparel for White and his assistants. Although it did not expect the regulation NPS gray and green uniform with accompanying Stetson, the Park Service wanted the guides in what Cammerer called “the holiday attire of the western cowboy”: a twenty-gallon cowboy hat, a red silk handkerchief around the neck, and overalls.<sup>49</sup> As elsewhere in the nation, the public held federal park officials accountable for the actions of local operatives, and the agency demanded the appearance of professionalism even when it lacked genuine control.

Visitor services proliferated, and the Park Service had to grapple with a range of businesses that did not always understand the agency’s objectives. Within the boundaries of the monument, agency dictums held sway, although the remote location and the values of the era resulted in some unlikely activities. In 1928, the Cavern Supply Company offered lunch 750 feet below ground. The lunchroom seemed entirely beyond the nature of activities the park service preferred to permit. It was a curiosity, albeit an essential one for visitors who made the long trek through the cave, but it seemed to negate the ideals for which the agency stood. In this light, the lunchroom can be seen as a concession to local interests as the Park Service embarked on the long and often intricate process of developing the park without alienating the local constituency.<sup>50</sup>

Outside monument boundaries, the agency had even less control. By 1927, an unregulated, privately owned visitor service industry surrounded the entrance to the park. White’s City — astride the monument boundary where the park access road intersected the main highway and named for C. L.

---

<sup>48</sup> Arthur E. Demaray to W. F. McIlvain, October 3, 1925; W. F. McIlvain to Stephen T. Mather, October 19, 1925, NA, RG 79, 7, Carlsbad Caverns; Ise, *Our National Park Policy*, 330; Rothman, *Preserving Different Pasts*, 134-36.

<sup>49</sup> Demaray to McIlvain, October 3, 1925; McIlvain to Stephen T. Mather, October 19, 1925; W. F. McIlvain to Stephen T. Mather, January 30, 1926; Demaray to McIlvain, February 3, 1926, NA, RG 79, 7, Carlsbad Caverns.

<sup>50</sup> A. E. Demaray to Thomas Boles, May 27, 1927, NA, RG 79, 7, Carlsbad Caverns; Rothman, *Preserving Different Pasts*, 136.

“Charlie” White, who homesteaded the tract — provided tourist services even as it threatened the standards the agency promoted. When Charlie and Emma White arrived in southeast New Mexico from Kentucky in 1909, the approach road to the cavern entrance served only the guano industry. White came to New Mexico for the dry air; like many arrivals since the turn of the century, he initially worried less about how he made a living than about the air he breathed. White taught school at Francis, New Mexico, herded sheep, served as cashier in a bank he tried to start, and installed the first gasoline pumps at Loving, New Mexico. He encountered Jim White in a chance meeting in 1926, and on hearing of the caverns and Jim White’s promotional efforts, Charlie White rushed to Carlsbad to file a homestead claim on one half section, 320 acres, that straddled the road at the turn-off. He had never even seen the land.<sup>51</sup>

By 1926, automobile visitors had yet to reach the caverns in huge numbers, but Charlie White, a seasoned entrepreneur, anticipated that a deluge would not be long in coming. He owned his land, putting him beyond the reach of federal officials. He built a Texaco station, a little cafe, and put up ten tents. Despite struggling to acquire water, White found himself in control of a precious resource: the only stop with food, gasoline, and overnight accommodations between the town of Carlsbad, twenty miles down the road, and the caverns. He was a tireless worker and developer; by 1940, not only did White’s City sport a post office, it offered more than three hundred rooms that were typically filled each night during the summer season.<sup>52</sup> Although Charlie White’s development existed only because of the park, it also competed with the licensed operators. This position forced the Park Service to respond.

When the Park Service looked to solidify its management position at Carlsbad, it turned to Colonel Thomas Boles. Boles arrived in 1927, just as the Park Service began its campaign to lift the caverns to national park status, and remained as its superintendent for nineteen years. Like Jim White before him, Boles was a great showman. He was also an enthusiastic park manager. A native of Arkansas and the son of a U.S. congressman, Boles possessed experience and connections that far exceeded most national monument custodians. An engineer by training, he entered the Park Service in 1922 as the superintendent of Hawaii National Park, later designated Hawaii Volcanoes National Park; after a five-year stint there, he left the agency, but returned at the behest of Horace Albright.<sup>53</sup>

Boles’ combination of experience, temperament, and connections perfectly suited a national monument on the way to becoming a national park. Throughout the late 1920s, Carlsbad Cave received increasing attention, not only from scientists and the public, but also from Congress. In an age when congressional officials and their government counterparts routinely departed the national’s capital during

---

<sup>51</sup> Bart Ripp, "Greetings from White's City," *Albuquerque Living*, March 1984, 70-71; Billy Mack Jones, *Health-Seekers of the Southwest, 1817-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 175-98; White's City Gazette and Souvenir Menu, n.d., Carlsbad Caverns Research Library, CACA.

<sup>52</sup> Ripp, "Greetings from White's City," 70; Robert Bryant, "Cashing in on the Caves," *New Mexico Business Journal* 9 n. 11 (November 1985): 53-55.

<sup>53</sup> A. E. Demaray to The Times Record Company, Fort Smith Arkansas, May 26, 1927, NA, RG 79, 7, Carlsbad Caverns; Shankland, *Steve Mather of the National Parks*, 251; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 114-16; Albright as told to Robert Kahn, *The National Park Service: The Founding Years, 1913-1933* (Salt Lake City: Howe Bros. Press, 1986), 175.

the torpor of summer, Mather possessed an unequaled prize — the junket to national parks and proposed national parks. As a way of keeping his alliances strong, Mather often took caravans of members of Congress and their friends to the parks. In October 1927, the chair of the House appropriations committee, Louis Cramton of Michigan, and two other committee members arrived in Carlsbad to inspect the monument in a specially provided Fred Harvey company sleeper car. Boles met them, and in a four-car caravan he took the congressmen to the caves and provided the trip of a lifetime. Cramton was a friend of the agency, and the trip helped persuade him of the need for national park status. The Park Service continued to invest resources in the monument, sending inspectors and even educational experts, a sure sign Carlsbad Cave played an important role in agency plans. By 1930, when the bill to create Carlsbad Caverns National Park came before Congress, Mather, Albright, and Boles had all played integral roles in securing the support necessary to pass the bill.<sup>54</sup>

Against the backdrop of the national park bill, Frank E. Nicholson arrived at Carlsbad Caverns with a fifteen-person team to seek out unexplored parts of caverns. Nicholson was a journalist and showman, a teller of tall tales who craved the limelight. In 1929, a syndicate of publishers sponsored an expedition to enter the unexplored parts of Carlsbad Cavern. Amelia Earhart, the famous flier, told Boles she wanted to accomplish this very goal, but her aerial adventures precluded her quest to explore underground. Nicholson was able to attach himself to the publishers' expedition, and promptly turned it into his own adventure. When the party arrived at Carlsbad Cavern on February 20, 1930, its lack of knowledge of spelunking quickly became apparent, but Nicholson did not let a lack of expertise get in the way of a good story. His daily articles with the Carlsbad Caverns byline told a much more exciting story than the minuscule discoveries credited to him; in one case, Nicholson claimed the discovery of a pit of record-breaking depth that was actually more shallow than other existing caves. With the technologies of the day, there was little further exploring to accomplish, and with the publishers in need of something sensational, the endeavor fell apart. Douglas Oliver, known for a book about African hunters Martin and Osa Johnson, took the lead after the sponsors removed Nicholson. In the end, Oliver wrote a book about the adventure curiously mistitled *A Boy Scout in the Grand Cavern* that mentioned neither Nicholson nor Boles, and people in the area made fun of the folly. Boles simply regarded the adventure as another source of free publicity for his park.<sup>55</sup>

After his source of funding waned, Nicholson was forced to scrape for ways to pay his bills. He invented stories about his experiences in the caverns; in one adventure falling rock trapped him, in another he was lost and rescued himself. Despite the fabrications, Nicholson kept the park on the front page of many newspapers, earning the gratitude if not the respect of locals. He also wrote a little booklet called *Jim White's Own Story*, according to local legend as a way to pay his bill, and in the end, White became the heroic figure of the caverns. Although *Jim White's Own Story* resulted as much

---

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Boles to A. E. Demaray, November 21, 1927; Thomas Boles to H. M. Albright, July 8, 1929; Minor R. Tillotson to H. M. Albright, May 14, 1929; Memo for Mr. Albright, May 22, 1929, NA, RG 79, Series 6, Carlsbad Caverns.

<sup>55</sup> H.S. Hunter, "Amelia Earheart to Lead Party Exploring Carlsbad Caverns Pit," *El Paso Herald*, Feb 1, 1930; Nymeyer and Halliday, *Carlsbad Caverns: The Early Years*, 140-47.

from Nicholson's imagination as from White's recollections and much of it was demonstrably false, it remained the most complete version of the story of the place. It also became the prism through which the nation understood the caverns. A few months after Nicholson departed, President Herbert Hoover signed the bill proclaiming Carlsbad Caverns National Park.<sup>56</sup>

Carlsbad Caverns National Park became one of the best examples of the second generation of national parks. After the initial parks, Yellowstone and Yosemite, the first generation were largely mountain tops. Mount Rainier and Grand Teton national parks typified the breed; both were relatively small and restricted to land that was difficult to use for other economic purposes given the technologies of the day. As Mather and Albright broadened support for the parks, they seized upon other strategies. Geography played an important role. No area of the country received more NPS attention during the 1920s than did the East. The creation of national parks like Acadia, Great Smokey Mountains, Shenandoah, and Mammoth Cave made the park system national and dramatically increased park visitation. The Park Service looked to expand the rationale for park selection beyond scenic mountaintops. The combined promotional efforts of White, Davis, and even Boles played an instrumental role in creating a meaning for Carlsbad Cave National Monument that resonated loudly enough in American society to merit its transfer to the national park category. The combination of factors granted Carlsbad Caverns a special status that persisted for more than two generations and that elevated tourism to an unparalleled level of importance in southeastern New Mexico and the trans-Pecos.

Tourism did not replace the existing social, economic, and cultural structure of the region and it accelerated the development of an infrastructure that supported other kinds of growth. Roads improved in the region, and as more and more tourists came, a measure of prosperity became typical. Favorable and consistent national press coverage elevated Carlsbad not only as a destination for visitors, but ultimately as a place to live and work. The national park became an indicator of growth and even a predictor of long-term stability and prosperity.

The growing importance of Carlsbad Caverns showed that the attributes of southeastern New Mexico and the trans-Pecos could be presented in many ways. Agriculture and ranching remained tenuous even with irrigation, and the people of the region searched for new strategies. While guano mining was one primary use of the caves, it was not the only one. With the attention of the GLO and the National Geographic Society, the caves acquired a new meaning that placed them in the same category as the Grand Canyon in the national mindset. This iconography spoke to Americans, newly empowered by the automobile to go where they pleased, and the full-fledged promotional campaign of Boles and the Park Service attracted them. In southeastern New Mexico, the caves and the Park Service fit well together.

Tourism grew rapidly throughout the 1920s, compelling a change in nomenclatural status for the national monument. Like other similar changes in designation, the proclamation of Carlsbad Caverns

---

<sup>56</sup> Gilmore, "History of Guadalupe Mountains National Park," 8-11; Rosa Lee Wylie, *History of Van Horn and Culberson County, Texas* (Hereford, TX: Pioneer Book Publishers, n.d.), 20; Froeschauer, Cultural Landscape Report for the Frijole Ranch, 8-25.

National Park attested to the growing importance of the place in the experience and iconography of industrial society. Carlsbad Caverns became a place that people expected middle-class Americans and their children to see. It came to reflect their values and self-image, their conception of the relationship between the American nation and the physical world on the North American continent.

At its inception, Carlsbad Caverns National Park did not yet define southeastern New Mexico. The new park was ancillary to layers of agricultural and ranching activity, a shadow economy on which regional people depended but to which they typically failed to grant importance. With a federal presence, tourism, and the dollars that both generated, the caverns pulled away from the neighboring towns and ranches, at least until the trauma of the Great Depression of 1929 and the rescue of the New Deal increased the similarities between Carlsbad Caverns and the rest of the region.